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FROM

Hon. B. Thompson

S P E E C H

OF

MR. RHETT, OF SOUTH CAROLINA,

ON THE

OREGON QUESTION.

Delivered in the House of Representatives, U. S., January 5, 1846.

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Dec. 18, 1895

SPEECH.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, January 5, 1846.—The House having under consideration the joint resolution reported by the Committee on Foreign Affairs, for giving the twelve months' notice to Great Britain of the termination of the Convention of 1827, respecting the joint occupation of Oregon: Several members having addressed the House—

Mr. RHETT obtained the floor, and spoke as follows :

Mr. SPEAKER: The gentleman from Ohio who had just taken his seat, had stated, and stated truly, that the question before the House was, whether we should give Great Britain the notice required by the treaty of 1827, in order that the common occupancy it provides for, may be terminated; and had denounced all those who may be opposed to giving the notice, as doomed to the blackest infamy, and the curses of posterity. (Mr. McDOWELL rose and said, that he used those expressions towards those only who were opposed to getting Oregon.) Nobody is opposed to getting Oregon; but I am glad, the gentleman has qualified his language; because otherwise, he would himself have fallen under his own denunciations. I hold in my hand the journal of the last session of Congress, in which a vote on this very question of notice to Great Britain to terminate the convention of 1827, is recorded. A resolution had been offered by the gentleman from Indiana (Mr. OWEN) for this purpose in the House. That resolution was referred to the Committee on Foreign Affairs. The committee, aided by my vote as one of its members, reported against the resolution. The Committee on Territories subsequently reported a bill with respect to Oregon, but omitted in its details the notice to Great Britain now so strenuously urged. Thus every committee of the last House of Representatives reported against this measure. How did it get into the bill? The gentleman from Massachusetts, over the way, (Mr. ADAMS,) suggested its insertion; and it was inserted in the bill from the Committee on Territories, by a vote of 120 to 81. The majority of both the South and the West, voted against it. The gentleman from Illinois (Mr. WENTWORTH,) the gentleman from Missouri (Mr. BOWLIN,) the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. McDOWELL) and even you, Mr. Speaker, joined with me in voting against it. And now we are to hear homilies

concerning this measure, upon good faith, and the Baltimore convention, and Southern honor!! Sir, I am precisely where I have ever been on this question. I opposed it, at the last Congress. I shall oppose it now, unless good reasons can be given to induce me to change my course. The change of others, operating perhaps to increase the fury of their zeal, can hardly be expected to carry conviction to any mind intent only on truth or the true interests of the country. When the bill of the last year, finally passed, many with myself voted for it with great reluctance, although we were told, that if the state of the negotiations then pending did not justify it, the notice would be easily stricken out in the Senate. The Senate justified our expectations on this point, although not in the precise mode we had expected; and the notice was not given.

I come, sir, to this question, again presented to the House—shall the notice be given for the termination of the joint occupancy with Great Britain of the Oregon territory? There is no other question in fact; for all the other measures recommended by the President in his message, with respect to the territory, will pass with scarcely a minority.

And the first position, I will take in the debate is this—those who are for changing the existing state of things—those who are for giving the notice and abrogating the convention of 1827, are bound to show, the propriety and policy of the measure. For twenty years, the convention has continued under various administrations. If the policy of the past is to be changed, let the reasons be assigned. Declamation about the valor of the West, and the rapacity of Great Britain, however interesting, will not be sufficient to decide the question. In order that we may understand the effect of your policy, we ask, what is your object in giving the notice? Gentlemen all around me, give the same answer the President in his message shadows forth. He says, that “before we can take exclusive jurisdiction of Oregon, the notice must be given; and he recommends accordingly, that it shall be given. Well, we give the notice, in order that we may proceed at the end of the year, to take “exclusive jurisdiction” of Oregon. This is the object of the resolution before the House. If we are told now, that we must go on to this measure, to accomplish this object—how much stronger will be the argument to pride and consistency, to press it to its conclusion when once begun. Now, I ask, gentlemen, how can we take exclusive jurisdiction of Oregon without war? Must we not, to accomplish this object, at the end of twelve months, pull down the cross of St. George from over some thirty forts, and place the stripes and stars in its stead, and either drive every Briton out of the territory, or compel him to swear allegiance to our Government? Is this what gentlemen

intend? If not, the notice ought to be abandoned. But if this is what they propose to do, then it is war—plain, unequivocal war—war of our making, and in which we are to be the aggressors. Negotiation, we are told, has ceased on our part; and it will hardly be supposed, under such circumstances, that it will be further proposed by Great Britain. She will, most probably, after our notice, stand on the defensive. She will say, “we shall not assail you; but here we are, and we shall not move.” We must move, if the policy proposed, is carried out. We must be the aggressors. We must turn Great Britain out of Oregon.

Now in all contests between nations, involving the calamities of war, it is of the very last importance, to have the right. We should not only be satisfied that we are right, but the cause of humanity and justice—the great cause of free government itself, involved in our destinies, demands, that the nations of the civilized world, should perceive that we are right. Wrong, violence and injustice, are the attributes of tyrannies. Peace and justice, are the foundations of all free governments. To move in accordance with our institutions, we must shew, in the clearest manner, that either our essential interests, or our vital liberties, require us to assail another nation, and, perhaps, light up the whole of Christendom with the flames of war.

Sir, I have listened with great attention, to learn, from gentlemen, what are the reasons that require us to change our position, under the Convention of 1827, and become the aggressors in this contest. Is the convention operating to our disadvantage, more than it has done for the last twenty years? On the contrary, under the administration of General Jackson and Mr. Van Buren, it did operate greatly to our disadvantage. Great Britain, scattered over the country her trading posts and settlements. Yet, these administrations acquiesced in its operation. But within the last five years, things have changed. Our citizens have turned their faces to the Pacific; and many thousands have entered that territory. Daily the tidings arrive of new companies, taking up their march across the Rocky Mountains, by the peaceful instrumentality of emigration, to settle the ownership and destiny of that vast country. Thus, we endured the convention of 1827, whilst operating against us; but now, when it is rapidly and surely securing to us the ascendancy in Oregon, and must give us its final mastery, its abrogation is furiously urged. If Great Britain should be dissatisfied with the present state of things, it would be natural enough. Gentlemen should remember, that the negotiations which have lately taken place, and that all negotiations that have heretofore taken place, have been at her instance. Why should we not rest under the Convention of 1827, with all the advantages it secures

us; and compel her to move, or surrender the territory under its operation. Why should we not make her to be the aggressor—make her give us the notice, and expel us out of Oregon? In taking the contrary course, we are pursuing the very policy she desires, and are subserving her interests, not ours.

One gentleman, and one only, has attempted to show, that the convention of 1827 operated against us. The gentleman from Indiana, (Mr. OWEN,) whose accurate knowledge of this whole subject, and ability in enforcing his opinions, entitle all that falls from him to great consideration, has stated, that the notice should be given, because our citizens are not allowed by the British, to settle on the north bank of the Columbia. But how are they prevented? The gentleman has told us, in a very grievous tale. One of our poor settlers lately pitched his cabin on the north side of the Columbia river; and forthwith received a bonus of eight hundred dollars to go over to the south side! And this is the enormous evil, under the great scarcity of land, which we must no longer endure, and which calls upon us as a nation, to put an end to the convention! But the gentleman assigned another reason. The notice should be given, in order to prevent collision, because our hardy emigrants *would* go north of the Columbia. How these two reasons, can be consistent with each other, it may not be easy to comprehend. We must give the notice because our settlers cannot go north of the Columbia river; and then, we must give it, because they will. But the notice is, to prevent collision in Oregon!! How that will be, if we are to turn the British out of the territory, in consequence of it, it is hard to understand. If it does avoid collision in Oregon, will it not precipitate it over the whole world? A general war with Great Britain, is his method of avoiding collision in Oregon! Such reasoning, surely, cannot be necessary to a strong cause.

But let us yield, that we have any advantages under the convention of 1827. Suppose it operates to the benefit of Great Britain, instead of ours—how can abrogating the convention, in order that we may extend our “exclusive jurisdiction” over Oregon, gain us the territory? Can we take exclusive jurisdiction? and if we can, is it worth the necessary cost?

Sir, it is hardly worth while to mention Oregon in the war, if we are to have a war with Great Britain for it. If there is any fight there, it requires no great powers of prophesy to foretell, in the present state of things, with whom will be the mastery. Great Britain, with her forts and military preparations, with thousands of Indians under her control, is certainly most likely to prevail against our settlers, scattered and unarmed, without a can-

tion or a block house to defend them, and hundreds of miles of trackless mountains intervening, to prevent our aid. At least, she can maintain her position, and prevent our conquest. If the people of Oregon, British and American, however, act with wisdom, they will keep the peace with each other, and leave the two nations to fight out the war between themselves. After the first gun is fired, we will hear no more of Oregon on this side of the Rocky Mountains. Our people, will have quite fighting enough to employ them nearer home, involving far nearer and dearer interests. The taking or re-taking of Canada, Nova Scotia, or New Brunswick—the maritime supremacy of the seas—our ravaged coasts or burning cities, will demand all the energies rage, ambition, and lust can give to war. As the Duke of Wellington once said in the British Parliament, a war with the United States, can be no “little war.” The fact, that it shall have arisen for such a cause as Oregon, so fairly liable to adjustment, if there was any disposition for peace, will be an infallible indication, of the extremities to which it must go. It must be common to every sea and continent; and convulse, perhaps involve, the whole civilized world in its fearful ravages. How can Oregon be gained by such a war? In but one way. We must be successful, and overthrow the mighty fabric of the British empire. We cannot gain it by a drawn fight, after mutual injuries, like our last war, concluded without the original cause of its existence, being even mentioned in the terms of peace. The nature of the object contended for, will not admit of this. The spirit which creates the contest will not tolerate it. We must, in language used in the other end of the Capitol, be able “to dictate our terms at the cannon’s mouth.” The mightiest nation since the days of Rome, must be vanquished by our arms; and her pride and her glory, be torn from her forever. She is of the same great race with ourselves; and it would be disparaging our proud ancestry to suppose, that any other than a long, exhausting, and terrific struggle, can accomplish her downfall.

Sir, I ask gentlemen, with the most extravagant estimate of our resources, are they sure that we are adequate to such an enterprise, and can thus obtain Oregon? They ought to be sure, for the sacrifices are too mighty to be risked on hazards. It may be, as the gentleman from Indiana (Mr. OWEN) intimated, that we may be compelled to meet Great Britain in arms, and dispute her ascendancy in the world. History has shown that nations, when great, will aim at supremacy; and, from being rivals, soon look upon each other as enemies. Carthage and Rome in ancient times; and Great Britain and France for many centuries past, elucidate this tendency in nations. Despite the strong ties of origin and interests, we may be compelled,

from the same causes, to meet Great Britain in a mortal struggle, in which one or the other people must be overthrown. But the gentleman's policy, in precipitating a contest now concerning Oregon, is utterly at variance with such anticipations. If such a contest is to arise, is it our policy to make or hasten it? Time can win us Oregon. Time can place us above such a struggle, or give us power successfully to meet it. Look at our progress to greatness and power. Already, in fifty years, upwards of twenty millions of people, daily increasing beyond all parallel, with a commerce, binding to us, in the golden chains of interest, every nation in every clime. We are gaining, and Great Britain, is relatively losing power every day, both in Oregon and throughout the world. Why should we interrupt our certain and inevitable destiny to supremacy amongst the nations of the earth, by a premature contest, if called for by neither interest nor honor? If Great Britain should believe gentlemen's speculations to be true, she, indeed, might urge on the contest; or, what for her would be far better, leave it to those who are here pressing matters to an issue with her, to work out her policy. But this is not the course which American interests require. Give us fifty, thirty, twenty years—and we can defy Great Britain or the world.

But we are not to have the war with Great Britain alone, if the nature of the struggle shall be such as gentlemen have vauntingly and defyingly maintained. They say, that it will be a war between systems of government—between monarchy and republicanism—between despotic and free governments. Now, that Great Britain should endeavor to give this aspect to any war she may have with us, for any cause, is natural enough. If she can succeed in making the crowned heads of Europe believe, that the spirit of Revolutionary France is abroad in the United States; and that we have seized the sword, to upturn their thrones, and force liberty throughout the world, she will not lack allies in her cause. Our fate—the fate of republican government, entrusted to our care and maintenance, will be sealed. Great as we may be, it will hardly be maintained, that we can vanquish all Christendom combined against us. Sir, again I ask the question, if this is to be the contest, what can we gain by precipitating it? Should we not wait—wait until we gather the strength, which time is certainly and inevitably bringing to our aid? Wait until we are assailed—and then, wait still longer if we can, whilst we make preparations better to fight for liberty and life. If Oregon is to involve us in a contest, in which our very existence is to be staked, let us understand the issue. We are to get Oregon, by vanquishing the world!!

But admit that we succeed—we overthrow the British empire—plant our

eagle on the palace of St. James—force free governments over every throne in Europe; and Oregon—the whole of Oregon, is ours. What then? We must be ruined ourselves. Suppose the Union and our form of free government survives the contest, can any gentleman believe that, in reality, our Government will be the same at its termination, as at its commencement? I am one of those who believe, that all the liberty our Constitution confers, exists in its limitations. Take away its limitations—its admirable partition of powers between the States and the federal head, by which the different sections of the Union can protect their peculiar interests, and it erects over us, one of the most odious despotisms the world has ever seen. Sir, all my life, and here for nine years, I have been striving to enforce these limitations, into the practice of the Government. The tendency of the system, is to centralization, as its general operation clearly proves. Nothing but a calm reasoning intelligence, can be able to arrest this tendency, and secure to the States the rightful powers belonging to them; and thus secure liberty and safety to the citizens in all parts of the Union. Such a state of the popular mind, cannot exist in war. All wars are adverse to liberty. They produce violence, not virtuous restraint. They appeal to force, and not to reason. But with our system of government, we must strengthen, by employing alone in war, the powers of the General Government. The limitations of the Constitution will be subverted, if in the least in the way of the efficient prosecution of hostilities; whilst all opposition to save the system, by insisting on its limitations, will be considered as unpatriotic or treacherous. Nor are these inferences, mere speculations. The only wars we have ever had, although far shorter than can be anticipated from the struggle we have now proposed to us, ended in enforcing Federalism in the system. After our Revolutionary war, the first movements of our form of government, under the military influences of our Revolution, were to Federalism. Again, after our last war, although originating with the Republican or Democratic party, and supported by them—all their principles were subverted, under the influences it left behind it. The paper system it engendered—its banks—its debts—its tariffs—its internal improvements, although partially overthrown, still form the points of controversy between the two great parties of the country. It has required thirty years of peace and discussion, to rid, even partially, the Constitution of its corrupt and centralizing influences. Who will look for any reform of the taxing power, or your vicious system of expenditures, after such a war as gentlemen propose? All the limitations of the Constitution, from long desuetude, will be obsolete; and your President, re-elected at his volition, will be the monarch of a despotism. If

the Constitution and liberty itself will be thus endangered; does it not become gentlemen, to show clearly the necessity of any measure which may lead to such disasters? If war wins the wealth and empire of the world, it would be too dear at such a cost. But war, is waste and poverty. It is crime, enormous crime—generally of all parties concerned, but always of one; and as they have been usually conducted, they are unmitigated evils, and the fiercest scourges of God. The only wars which can be justifiable, and under which a free government can endure, are wars of defence—wars to prevent tyranny and wrong. Such were the only two wars, in which we have been engaged, since we have been a people. In such a war, I know we are unconquerable; and I neither fear Great Britain nor any other nation whom the lust of conquest may bring against us. But it is another thing, when we are to become the assailants, and conquer others. They may be, acting on the defensive, as unconquerable as we are; nor can we be conquerors of others, without being conquerors of ourselves. Is it such a war, in which gentlemen propose, we shall now engage? No, sir. We are to be the assailants—conquer Great Britain—overthrow monarchy in the world, and wind up, by re-establishing it, over the ruins of American liberty and the Constitution of the United States. And this is the way to get Oregon!! Sir, I am for getting Oregon; but, according to my humble apprehension, this is plainly a very *bad way* of *losing* Oregon. Gentlemen are furious in denouncing Great Britain, but they may be assured, if they do not know it, that they are her very best friends, pursuing such a policy.

But we are told our honor requires us to give the notice proposed, and to move on to the possession of Oregon, reckless of consequences. We are all of us, I believe, for moving on—certainly as far as Great Britain has gone. But this is mere matter of policy. What has our honor to do with this question in any form? Does any one alledge that Great Britain has violated the convention of 1827, and, therefore, it should be annulled? There is no such allegation. Is our honor tarnished, by its existence? Then Great Britain, the other party to it, is also dishonored; and all the great statesmen preceding us since 1818, who originated and have continued this convention, have had unmerited reputations. What has Great Britain done or said; to touch our honor? I have heard of nothing, but the tone of the negotiation. I have read over the correspondence between the negotiators, and can see nothing in it that the most delicate sensibility to insult or wrong amongst gentlemen, could be offended at. But if it had been far otherwise—is the honor of a great nation, to take fire at the good or bad manners or style of their agents? The honor of a country, in a free government,

is not the property of the punctilious few, or of one man, but of the people; and can scarcely be separated, from its essential interests. It will not only be jealous, but just; and can never disregard the great object of all association in government—protection to property, liberty, and life. Remember, what our ancestors endured in our Revolution, and still more signally, in 1812, from this very nation, before they appealed to arms. If I had heard from the South, this extraordinary enunciation of our honor being implicated in the measure proposed, I could, in some measure, comprehend it. Our last war, which they forced on, was with them, a war for honor, and nothing else. But to hear it from the North, and the Northwest, where the word is scouted as equivalent to murder, is very surprising. Here are gentlemen, who would hang as a felon any Southern gentleman, who should appeal to the duel to redress an insult; and yet, for no insult at all—for no wrong, or alleged wrong—they would plunge two of the greatest nations in the world into war, “to maintain the nation’s honor!” They act, I suppose, on the principle, that “one murder makes a villain—millions a hero.” Sir, I am no advocate for private war; but I am at a loss to understand, how gentlemen can so recklessly urge on and defend a great public war, and yet condemn private war. If insult, cannot justify violence in the individual, neither can it justify it in a nation composed of its individuals. Matters seem to be strangely reversed. It is the South now, that is dead to national honor! The North—the religious and moral North—in its fiery impatience at even imaginary wrong, is for rushing into war; and, with its panting chivalry, taunts the tame reluctance of the South to vindicate “the honor of the country!” Sir, I have no imputations to make against the North or West, in this fury for strife and carnage; but I hope, I may be pardoned at least for saying, that the South needs no defender here against charges, express or implied, of indifference to the honor of the Union, or of readiness to maintain it. Whilst history exists, she needs no other vindicator. But she will not, without cause, take offence when none is intended; nor rush into a war, when it cannot be shown, that either the interest or honor of the Union, requires its stern alternative. But if, against her judgment and will, she is overruled in the common council, to which, by the Constitution, all such matters are entrusted; she will abide the issue. As heretofore, she will take her part in the struggle; and where the battle is hottest and thickest, there she will be found.

Mr. Speaker, I regretted to hear a colloquy which passed yesterday between the gentleman from New York, (Mr. KING,) and the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. DOUGLASS.) It seems, that the gentleman from Illinois

had said, that a game was being played, to defeat action on the subject of Oregon in this House; and the gentleman from New York, by way of telling the House, what that game was, pulled out of his desk the Times newspaper, of London, and read an extract, in which it was anticipated, from the most manifest causes of interest, that the south and the east would be opposed to immediate and extreme measures. The gentleman had mentioned but one name—(Mr. CALHOUN)—but that was a talisman quite sufficient to open his designs. As the gentleman is so ready to charge games on others, who may oppose the measure before the House, I suppose he cannot object to hear, what others say of his game in supporting it. Well, then, it is said that the gentleman and his northern friends, are engaged in the interesting game of overthrowing, in the Democratic party, that southern portion of it, which is supposed to have overthrown; in the late presidential election, the pretensions of New York to the Presidency. By the use of the Texas question, the West and the South were united, and the North was placed in a minority, and her leading statesman put aside for the Presidency. The gentleman and his friends, under the highest sense of patriotism, now propose, to unite the West and the North by the question of Oregon, and thus destroy the ascendancy of the South; well knowing, that her leading statesmen, will not sacrifice the interests of that great region, for party power or personal aggrandizement. Hence his burning zeal for the *whole of Oregon*; and the weak but poisoned shafts, he aims against the great statesman of the South. The gentleman from Illinois, (Mr. DOUGLASS,) also, is supposed to be in a game equally interesting. The West is to make the next President; and, for this purpose, nothing is so well adapted, as to unite the whole West on some great Western measure. The question of Oregon, by appealing at once to their hatred of Great Britain, the lust of dominion, and the supposed interests of the Union, will sweep over the country like a whirlwind, lifting up those who uphold, and overthrowing all who oppose it. Thus, are the property and blood of the people of the United States, to be staked, in this mighty and profligate gambling for power and place. In this game, are also joined many who oppose all reform in this Government, especially on the Tariff. They remember the policy of the Roman aristocracy, in getting up foreign wars, whenever the people sought to reform the corruptions and abuses they had spread over the State. To these, are added, all who hate the South and their institutions, like the gentleman from Massachusetts, (Mr. ADAMS,) and the gentleman from Ohio, (Mr. GIDDINGS.) When such evil birds are on the wing, we know the prey they seek. The South is to be desolated, by

invasion from abroad, and insurrection within. The North, is to be strengthened, by the addition of the British possessions north of our Union; and the South, and all Southern reforms, be forever buried beneath the fury of the storm such master spirits shall raise and control. Sir, I listened with great attention to the plea of the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. McDOWELL) for changing his course on this question. With me, he was formerly opposed to this notice; but he changes his course now, because it is the will of his constituents. Whilst changing his, he will not deny to other gentlemen the duty of adhering to their position, from the same controlling cause. I can see nothing but disaster to my constituents, from the war his policy proposes. His constituents, have scarcely anything to export to foreign nations. Nearly all that my constituents produce, is dependent on foreign nations for consumption, especially on that nation, with whom it is proposed to war. His constituents, will be far away from the contest—mine must meet it, face to face. His people, will have a market for their grain, in the armies which must muster and fight on our Northern line—mine, must see their produce rot in their barns, or be piled up in their fields, or be consumed by the enemy. These evils, or evils a thousand times worse, are no causes for not entering into a just war, to maintain the honor or rights of the Union; but they are sufficient, to make them demand, to make me demand, in their name, that you show, clearly and distinctly, that duty and patriotism require the sacrifice; and that, all other measures for peace being exhausted, we have no other alternative than the sword, to restore the outraged honor and violated rights of the country. Independently of interest, every principle of justice, humanity, and Christianity, requires that this shall be done. Let our consciences be clear of unnecessary blood; and, like our fathers, we be able, with confidence, to appeal to the Great Arbiter of the fate of nations for his approbation and support. Then victory, may not be ruin; and even defeat, be success; and military conquest, which has overthrown every other republic which has entered on its devastating career, may at least not leave us slaves. I do not believe, negotiation to be exhausted. I do not believe war to be inevitable; and I am, therefore, for leaving in those hands, to which the Constitution has entrusted them, the conduct, as well as the responsibility, of all measures which, in the present state of things, affect the question of peace or war. The Executive, I trust, in the estimation of gentlemen, is competent to this high duty; and whilst maintaining peace, will vindicate the honor and rights of the Union.



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